

VZCZCXRO8430  
RR RUEHDBU RUEHLN RUEHVK RUEHYG  
DE RUEHYE #1445/01 2861107  
ZNR UUUUU ZZH  
R 131107Z OCT 06  
FM AMEMBASSY YEREVAN  
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 4172  
RUEHLMC/MILLENNIUM CHALLENGE CORP  
INFO RUCNCIS/CIS COLLECTIVE

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 YEREVAN 001445

SIPDIS

SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR EUR/PPD, EUR/CARC, EUR/ACE

E.O. 12958; N/A

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [EAID](#) [KPAO](#) [KDEM](#) [AM](#)

SUBJECT: ARMENIAN REGIONAL NGOS MEETING WITH SOME SUCCESS

YEREVAN 00001445 001.2 OF 002

-----  
SUMMARY  
-----

1. PAO and PAS Grants Manager recently visited several NGOs outside of Yerevan that had received support from the Democracy Commission, whose work encompassed anti-corruption (in public education), journalism, and human rights. Not only did we find dedicated people, young and old, staffing the organizations, but we were able to witness the positive impact that the organizations were having in their communities and beyond. End Summary.

-----  
FIGHTING TO BRING PROBLEMS INTO THE OPEN IN GYUMRI  
-----

2. In Gyumri, we attended the sixth and final roundtable discussion on corruption in Armenia's schools held by the NGO "Guaranty." The goal of the NGO is to bring attention to the problem of teachers and University professors accepting bribes for better grades. The issue is particularly critical for male students who must enter and remain in good standing at state universities in order to defer their mandatory military service. Participants were mostly educators and students. Notably absent were government educational officials and representatives of university administrations. (COMMENT: Corruption is a serious and startlingly widespread issue at all levels of the education sector, which we will explore in more detail in future reporting. END COMMENT)

3. The discussion was quite candid, much of it directed toward the question of whether the primary effort of the group should be focused on trying to convince students and their families not to offer bribes or trying to prevent educators from seeking them. The objective of "Guaranty" is to set up monitoring groups that would try to detect instances where test scores did not appear to correspond to a student's academic record and denounce such instances in the press. Guaranty has a good relationship with the local press, which was well represented at the roundtable.

4. The PAO and Grants Manager were interviewed by the local television station, giving us a chance to explain the goals and decision-making process of the Democracy Commission. The interviews were aired later that evening. The PAO also helped in the presenting of awards to students who participated in Guaranty's poster design contest and certificates to key supporters in the local government, press and police force.

5. The PAO and Grants Manager also attended a teacher training session of the Gyumri NGO Ajakits (Supporter) which seeks to raise awareness and reduce the incidence of domestic violence. In a well organized participatory session at a local school, Ajakits, with the assistance of a Peace Corps volunteer, helped a group of over 30

teachers better understand the nature of domestic violence and trained them in recognizing its signs among their students. Over the last eight years, Ajakits has provided training to over 850 teachers.

¶16. Through training sessions, media activities, and awareness-raising events, Ajakits has achieved a fairly high public profile. Although meaningful statistics are hard to come by and interpret, Ajakits seems to have increased the willingness of the victims to come forward and of the police to investigate. Nevertheless, impediments to reporting the problem continue to exist. The Director recounted a recent case where a victim had been unwilling to go to the police for fear of the consequences at home. Ajakits will try to bring the case to the attention of school officials in the hopes that a teacher might be able to raise the issue with the law enforcement authorities and avoid problems for the woman.

¶17. Another NGO which has received support from the Democracy Commission is the Gyumri Press Club - "Asparez" (Arena). The Club, whose membership consists primarily of print and broadcast journalists, has been active for many years in promoting freedom of the press issues in Gyumri and beyond. Asparez also promotes a code of journalistic ethics. In the Club's office space is a conference room that is available to groups for free to hold press conferences and televised debates. The rather nice office space is partly financed by some for-profit activities that Asparez operates, including a furniture company which made the conference table and much of the furniture in their offices.

¶18. The day of our visit, Asparez had joined forces with the Yerevan Press Club and other interested parties to successfully delay a new draft law on the broadcasting industry that the government was trying to rush through the National Assembly (reftels). Later that evening, the head of Asparez was on the local television station to discuss Armenia's freedom of information law. Earlier that morning, the Armenian Telephone Company "Armentel" had been one of the "winners" of the Freedom of Information Center of Armenia's (FOICA)

YEREVAN 00001445 002.2 OF 002

"Padlock" award. FOICA gives annual awards for positive performance ("golden keys") and far-less-coveted negative awards "padlocks." Asparez had nominated Armentel as the least forthcoming, least transparent company in Armenia and FOICA agreed.

-----  
FIGHTING FOR CONSTITUTIONAL RIGHTS IN VANADZOR  
-----

¶19. PAO and Grants Manager also met with the Armenian Constitutional Rights-Protective Centre (ACRPC) in Vanadzor. With the help of a Democracy Commission grant, ACRPC has set up human rights libraries in half a dozen regions of Armenia. The libraries are used mostly by lawyers and university students to research human rights issues. ACRPC's main activity is to teach principles of human rights in Armenia's schools, part of the required curriculum. But the group also does advocacy on particular issues.

¶110. While PAO was sitting in ACRPC's offices, word came through about a ruling by Armenia's Constitutional Court on a case in which ACRPC had been intimately involved. In the Court's first ruling ever on a case brought by private individuals, it decided in favor of the plaintiffs, supported by ACRPC, who argued that they were entitled to government benefits, even if they chose not to accept the newly created social security cards. The impact of the ruling should result in the release of benefits for hundreds of Armenians who are without the cards. NOTE: Ironically, although the ruling was a victory for the individual against the state, USAID has been a key promoter of the social security card system. Some Armenians (and the Armenian Apostolic Church) objected to exchanging their Christian names for a number. END NOTE.

¶111. COMMENT: While the above is a select sampling out of hundreds of Armenian NGOs, (precisely ones that have established enough credibility to receive Democracy Commission support), nevertheless it offers an encouraging picture of dedicated people managing to

make a difference in an often difficult political and economic environment. We are encouraged not only by the idealism of the young and not so young people involved in these organizations, but also by their ability to make an impact on the society in which they live.

Godfrey